

VZCZCXRO0577
PP RUEHIK RUEHYG
DE RUEHTH #1342/01 1830432
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 020432Z JUL 07
FM AMEMBASSY ATHENS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9599
INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 001342

SIPDIS

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [GR](#)
SUBJECT: GREECE: FOREST FIRES, BRUTAL HEATWAVE TAKE TOLL

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: An eight-day heat wave and onslaught of rural fires destroyed the old-growth Mt. Parnitha National Forest in Attica, as well as other swaths of precious forest resources throughout Greece. In the face of at least nine deaths, critics have called the government "confused" and "spinning its wheels." The timing of the natural disaster bodes badly for the government if elections are held in September, as is widely expected. END SUMMARY.

ECOLOGICAL DISASTER

¶2. (U) On June 28, the last day of an eight-day heat wave that saw temperatures climb as high as 115 degrees, an enormous wildfire erupted in the protected national forest of Mt. Parnis (aka Mt. Parnitha), the last remaining substantial patch of solid forest in the greater Athens metropolitan area. Sheets of fine ash descended on most parts of the region, including areas as far as the city center and on the seacoast, both more than 30 kilometers from the fire site.

¶3. (U) The June 28 inferno was far more disastrous ecologically than previous forest fires in the region, eradicating forest zones that were hundreds of years old. Such was the intensity of the blaze, with flames reportedly shooting to a height of six yards, that helicopters had to evacuate Mt. Parnis Hellenic Air Force radar station -- never before abandoned under such circumstances.

¶4. (U) The Mt. Parnis fire was only one of the estimated 130 wildfires around Greece. On the island of Poros, a short distance from the port of Piraeus, residents mourned the loss of the island's Neorion pine forest and blamed sparks from power lines for igniting the blaze. In Larissa, central Greece, firefighters discovered the bodies of two local men, caught by flames while crossing a burning area. On Mt. Pelion, one of the most picturesque mountain areas in all of Greece, near the city of Volos, at least three separate fire fronts were consuming the thick forest on the eastern slope and threatening four villages.

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

¶5. (SBU) The Karamanlis government appeared overwhelmed by the fire and heatwave crisis. Media reports spoke of "confused" ministers and a cabinet "spinning its wheels." Thousands of angry Athens consumers derided power outages -- some lasting up to 23 hours -- as the electricity grid nearly buckled under record-breaking loads required to keep air conditioning units working in the scorching heat. At least nine deaths were directly attributed to the heat as hundreds of cases of heat stroke clogged hospitals. As if to add salt to the injury, a June 28 explosion and fire at a DEI (the state-controlled power company) sub-station in Thessaloniki

left large parts of Greek Macedonia and Thrace without electricity for the better part of the day.

PLENTY OF BLAME TO GO AROUND

16. (SBU) While opposition parties attacked the government for "abandoning" the country at a time of crisis, the causes of this ecological catastrophe lie in the perennial lack of planning and under-funding of key preparedness areas, irrespective of the political party in power. The crucial weaknesses of the state monopolistic power company have been no secret for years. At the peak of the crisis, DEI was reportedly recalling recently retired technical personnel to plug manpower gaps not being filled due to budget constraints. In addition to its antiquated equipment and poor maintenance, Greece's power generating problem, despite warnings that span several decades, remains unchanged. The bulk of demand comes from the south of the country. The bulk of generating capacity remains in the north, thus requiring expensive and inefficient methods of transferring power to consumers. The Greek Fire Brigade, conceived as a city firefighting force, has been saddled in recent years with the responsibility of forest firefighting throughout the country, a task that is stretching its manpower and technical capacities to the limits.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Greek pundits claim the June 2007 heat wave, power interruptions, and forest fires may have caused as much as a billion euros in damage to the Greek economy through lost man-hours, spoiled foodstuffs, damage to equipment, lost tourism, and costs of reforestation. The Karamanlis government could suffer at a time when polls speak of voter dissatisfaction with the economy and the overall performance of the public sector. If early elections do come

ATHENS 00001342 002 OF 002

in late September, as most observers believe, Karamanlis could feel an additional sting from dissatisfied voters.
COUNTRYMAN